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Americans reported still captive

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The U.S. government has hundreds of secret eyewitness accounts of Americans still held captive in Vietnam and Laos — accounts that are beginning to get attention after years of being discounted.

At issue is the fate of scores of Americans who remain unaccounted for in Southeast Asia since the end of the Vietnam war. Hanoi has returned 591 American prisoners, but the whereabouts of 2,494 others, most of whom are thought to be dead, remains a mystery.

Earlier this year a retired Green Beret lieutenant colonel told of leading a squad of Americans and anti-Communist guerrillas on a dangerous raid into Laos in a futile search for American servicemen thought to be held prisoner.

It wasn't the first reported mission to find Americans listed as missing in action.

In May 1981 it was disclosed that 20 to 30 U.S.-trained and paid Laotian mercenaries twice infiltrated Laos from Thailand in a futile search for American prisoners at a camp carved out of the jungle.

Information about such incidents has been difficult to obtain. No one will officially admit to the operations.

But the Defense Intelligence Agency admits holding nearly 1,700 sighting reports, including 465 eyewitness "live sightings," as of last December. Two per cent of the eyewitness sightings are dismissed as "known false," and the agency links 52 per cent of the 465 to "individuals since accounted for" — such as a freed CIA agent.

DIA officials have said privately that 98 per cent of eyewitness sightings the agency has investigated have proved credible.

Although the government has taken the position in the past that none of the sightings could be substantiated, critics assert that U.S. officials are using unrealistically high standards of proof to avoid the issue.

A review of the POW-MIA issue indicated that the government had proof of many servicemen left behind after the 1973 Paris peace accords, while for years it assured families and the public that no Americans, other than a few deserters, remained alive in Indochina.

In recent months, the Reagan Administration has shifted its position slightly, leaving room for the possibility that some of the 2,500 remain alive.

Lt. Col. James G. (Bo) Gritz, 44, the retired Green Beret who led "Operation Lazarus" into Laos late last year, said some of the money for his rescue mission came from private contributions. He indicated, although he did not say so directly, that the U.S. government helped finance the effort.

"The FBI has helped me; the CIA has helped us; the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok has helped us; the President stands ready to support us if and when we produce an American," Gritz said. "The government will not attach itself overtly for any kind of audit trail with this thing. They're petrified of it."

During Gritz's first mission in early 1981, which he called Operation Velvet Hammer, he assembled a team in Florida but said he was asked to halt the operation because an official government effort was being mounted.

In his second effort later that year, which he called Operation Grand Eagle, he succeeded in launching a four-man team. It collected information about possible POW sightings from Laotian refugees in Thailand.

Vietnam flatly denies that any American prisoners of war are being held now, but a Hanoi envoy did not respond directly when asked whether some Americans had chosen to stay or whether some captives might have been "overlooked."

Defense Department experts contend that the Communists, in every war they have been involved in, have held back prisoners. The United States, for example, has been seeking information for nearly 30 years on the fate of the 389 Americans held in a known North Korean prison camp. By the mid-50s, Hanoi held captive thousands of French legionnaires captured in Indochina, quietly releasing men and remains to the French government, usually

in exchange for ransom.

Reagan, in a June 30 letter to the National League of Families for American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, the leading national MIA group, wrote, "I assure you that actions to investigate live sightings [are under way] based on the assumption that some men are still held captive."

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